

[Bones Hooks]

Interview with Bones Hooks, pioneer Negro cowboy

December 23, 1940

1607 words [Folkstuff - Rangelore?]

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Matthew (Bones) Hooks, who for years worked on Panhandle ranches as a horse wrangler and “bronc-buster”, [know?] many tales of cowboy life in the early days, but he refuses to tell the most interesting ones” because it would rattle skeletons in the closets of prominent families”—old-timers who are still living or their descendants.

Bones, without calling embarrassing names, recites a case in point. Called as a witness before a grand jury recently, he recognized in the judge a pioneer cattleman.

“Bones, do you know anyone who has stolen cattle”—the judge caught the glint of memory in the piercing black eyes and hastily added-“now?” And Bones, whose lips had been forming the question, “What time are you talking about, Judge?” could honestly answer, “No”.

Both of them were recalling a certain day in the past when the judge, then a young man just starting out in the cattle business, and a young Negro cowboy drove a fine young male calf from the pastures of the Capitol Syndicate (XIT Ranch) to the white man's ranch.

The embryo cattleman could not afford to buy a good bull—Bones said “surly”; he would not use the word “bull” before a lady interviewer—which he needed for breeding purposes. He went to the Negro cowboy, who was working on the XIT at the time, and asked him if he knew where he could get one. Bones looked over the range and, seeing no one near,

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selected a fine-looking calf, which they drove toward the home ranch of the judge-to-be. Coming upon a still better animal, Bones exchanged the tired calf for the other, and proceeded on his way.

The young rancher tied up the calf until it was weaned to keep it from getting back with the mother cow. "It took about four days to wean a calf," said Bones. "After that time he would go down to the water hole and drink and then mosey out on the range and eating grass and forget all about him mamma".

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Bones, who was very young when he was working on Panhandle ranches in the days before law and order came, has good reason to remember the Vigilantes who took the place of the "law" in those days. The Negro cowboy, since the death of "Skillety Bill" Johnson of Canadian, is the last person to know the password of the Vigilantes.

When Skillety Bill died, persons interested in the history of the Panhandle went through his personal effects. Among his papers they found the notation that Bones was the only person left knowing the password. These same persons went to Bones and asked for the password, but he refused. "I am going to keep my word until I die," he said, "and then my papers will be left to the [museum?]. The password will be among them."

According to Bones, Skillety Bill got his name because he worked on the Frying Pan Ranch. Cowboys from the Panhandle ranches in the early days went to [Mobeetie?] (early Sweetwater), adjacent to Fort Elliott, to "celebrate". Negro women in the families of colored troops stationed at the army post would see Bill Johnson coming and say "There comes that Skillety (their version of Prying Pan) Bill fellow".

Skillety Bill figured in one of the most important episodes in Bones' life. The Negro boy was working at the time in old Greer County, which was a part of the "neutral Strip", locally

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called a second “No Man's Land”. Bones, young and inexperienced, had hired out to wrangle horses for a certain cattleman.

One day, while he was tending the horses and minding his own business, Vigilantes rode up and asked him, “Are you working for those cattlemen down the creek?” Bones admitted that he was. Before he could say “Jack Robinson”, the Vigilantes jerked him up and started to hang him in the nearest tree. They had already hanged the two white men mentioned to other convenient trees.

One of them Bones knew to be innocent. He was only a young boy who had come into the country looking for work two or three days before, and he who like himself, had hired out to the first men that offered him a job. But the Vigilantes, catching both of the white men with a herd of stolen cattle, took only circumstantial evidence into consideration and hanged them both. 3 Bones was certain that they were going to add him to their victims, when Skillety Bill spoke up in behalf of the colored lad, saying that he was a mere boy, wrangling horses for the boss and only carrying out orders of the cattle thief, whom he had taken to be a bona fide cattleman.

“A red-haired man astride a limb of the tree gave the rope around my neck a rough jerk,” Bones vividly recalled;” and said, ‘Aw, come on, let’s got it over with’; but Skillety Bill saved my life.”

After this narrow escape, Bones went into Oklahoma (then the Indian Territory) and so successfully “lost” himself that his own family and others thought him dead. At last he ventured back into Greer County. Walking through the streets of a Panhandle town, which he refuses to name, he came face to face with the sheriff (Skillety Bill).

The sheriff looked at him closely and finally said, “I thought you were dead. How long are you going to be here?”

“Only a little bit—a few days”, Bones replied.

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The sheriff started off down the street, turned back, and said, "How long did you say you were going to be in town? Did you say 'a little bit'?"

Bones, answered quickly, "Yes, sir, a little bit". He knew what would happen to him if he did not get out of town in a "little bit"—and he got.

The pioneer Negro broncho-buster knows cowboy life as few white persons now living. He was an interested listener around the campfires of nearly every ranch in the Panhandle. He heard many a lurid tale around a cow-chip blaze—words that can not be repeated in the hearing of ladies or in polite society. "Every horse, every man, bread and other articles of the camp, had a nickname, often unmentionable in mixed groups," he said.

Bones recalls an incident that occurred during a visit of Mrs. Charles Goodnight to a camp one day. One of the cowboys, who did not know of the lady's presence, said, "Bones, bring me up a horse."

"Which one?"

"that old—," the cowboy stopped suddenly and clapped his hand over his mouth, 4 preventing the escape of the horse's unmentionable name when he saw Mrs. Goodnight standing there. "You know which one I want," he added significantly.

Bones honors and reveres the pioneer women of his beloved Panhandle, because they helped him as they helped so many others. When the cowboys tormented him—as they were always doing in some fashion—they took his part and made the white boys stop shooting blank cartridges at his feet or whatever they were doing to him at the moment.

It was one of those pioneer women who taught Bones not to "cuss". His favorite by word was "I'God"—a corruption of "by God". This pioneer mother came to him one day and said, "Bones, young Bob is taking up your speech and I don't want him to say 'I'God'. I can't

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keep his from saying it as long as he hears you, so I'm going to have to break you of the habit. If you'll quit, I'll buy you a Sunday suit."

Bones wanted that suit. When Bob repeated the byword, the Negro boy would say, "Bob, white boys can get suits any time, but this the only way that I can get one. You mustn't say 'I'God', or I won't get that suit".

Bones, who attends every celebration of old-timers, at one of these recent gatherings met the daughter of one of the pioneer families for whom he used to work—he frequently associated with the children of the early settlers, especially the boys. He reminded her of the time when she was a very young lady indeed. At that time she had never seen a colored person.

"Remember when you first saw me eating with the other cowboys?" he said. "You peeked out from behind your mother's skirt and said, 'Mamma, one of them didn't wash his face'"

Bones said that he usually ate with the other cow hands. Once, when someone objected to the presence of the Negro boy at the same table, a pioneer housewife told the objector, "Everyone is treated alike at my table".

"In the early days," Bones said in answer to a question, "when a cowboy died on the trail, accidentally or otherwise, he was buried in a hole dug in the sod without loss of time and without much ceremony. The name of the dead man was sent to his family if anyone knew his real name or who his people were.

"Later, coffins were made of pine boards. Those who died were buried as soon as possible in those days, for obvious reasons. Relatives and friends sat up with the dead to keep the cats and dogs away.

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“Services for the dead were held by a friend or someone who was qualified—later by traveling preachers. Towns were far apart, and preachers and doctors had to go miles and miles to serve these communities.

“Meetings”—church services—” were held in the homes of pioneers until churches were built”, he concluded.